



ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

**WOMEN OF THE DECADE IN PUBLIC LIFE
& LEADERSHIP AWARD**

Foto: Mariel Kolmschot

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Ladies,

It is a distinct honour to receive the Women of the Decade in Public Life & Leadership Award. Especially today, on International Women's Day and in the middle of the COVID crisis. Or, let's hope towards the beginning of the end of the COVID-crisis.

It is important to recognize that enormous progress has been made. UNWOMEN rightly points out, there are many indications that women are increasingly able to exercise agency and voice within their families. These include the rising age of marriage; declines in birth rates as women are better able to choose whether and when to have children, and how many; and women's increased economic autonomy.

On education attainment girls are now ahead of boys in many countries. And the health gap has closed in many countries. Of course grave exceptions continue to exist, like the feminicide in China, but there is a lot to be proud of. But in the workplace and especially in political power, women still lag behind, in almost every aspect and in almost every country.

The progress that has been made and the fact that I stand here before you is thanks to women who dared to stand up and challenge societal norms about the place of women in society and power of female leadership. We stand on the shoulders of giants. Giant women, like Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Bouvoir and Betty Friedan. In the Netherlands Aletta Jacobs and Joke Smit played an important role by breaking down barriers and in our time Malala Yousafzai and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are taking the struggle forwards.

They are and remain important examples for us.

However, the COVID crisis has exposed structural inequalities and fragilities in our society and has led to several setbacks for women. Women stand in the front line, once again. They form the majority in the front line in health care and play an important part of combatting COVID and in the so-called essential workers.

At the same time, school closures lead to home schooling, in which mothers more often than not take the leading role, whilst they are also doing their own job. This leads to stressful situations, burn outs and restrictive measures also lead to noticeable increases in domestic violence, of which women are the main casualties.

Women hold more temporary and precarious jobs and are therefore are disproportionately losing their jobs.

So now more than ever we should continue to challenge societal norms and institutions that put women at a structural disadvantage. By shedding a light on the impact of the COVID

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crisis on women we can, no must, build a society that values women even more. Just like the spectacular leaps forwards in emancipation so far benefited both women and men, so will the next steps.

The spectacular drop in mortality during childbearing and births, benefited of course the mother, but also the child and father. The increased literacy of girls clearly benefits families as well. And it is almost funny to listen to the crazy arguments used against the suffragettes and the demand for women's rights.

During the first world war the female labour force participation increased dramatically in many countries and made the demand for voting rights all women, powerful and somehow inevitable. Nobody could deny voting rights to groups who had clearly contributed so much to their country.

However, a century later politics is still very much dominated by men. This crisis is demands and illustrates the value of female leadership, which is more relational and less directive. In a time of great social and mental stress, this is of great importance. During the Covid-19 crisis, we have heard anecdotally about women leaders doing a better job and new research backs that up. One study found that outcomes related to Covid-19, including number of cases and deaths, were systematically better in countries led by women. Another looked at governors in the U.S. and similarly found that states with female leaders had lower fatality rates. Female leaders were also more highly regarded. Researchers at Harvard found that that female leaders expressed more awareness of fears that followers might be feeling, concern for wellbeing, and confidence in their plans.

Having women in public life and leadership positions is not just better for women, it is better for everyone – in the COVID crisis and when we emerge out of this pandemic. And that is something we should all should be aspiring.

Female leaders like Angela Merkel and Jacinda Ardern have an excellent track record in combatting Covid. Their countries are doing better than comparable countries and there is a direct link with their leadership.

May be this worldwide crisis is a big opportunity for a leap forward and to convince society that female political participation and leadership is not something to be afraid of, but something to embrace for a better future for all.

This applies to leadership at all levels – from the family to the country and indeed global leadership. That female leadership has played a crucial role in my personal life. My mother decided to flee our home country Turkey and took three children with her on her journey to the Netherlands. My father, sister and I followed a year later to find a better future here. He had to give up his shops and his home and my parents had to start from scratch again.

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That was not always easy. The courage and perseverance of my parents and especially of my mother, have given us great opportunities. We were able to seize those opportunities which our parents and this country offered us.

We were offered a chance for a better future, a chance we did not have in Turkey. This is the chance I would like to pass to my four daughters. They should be able to follow their heart and achieve the same financial independence which I was able to attain with my university education in the Netherlands.

And in politics it is has been an honour to become the political leader of the Christian democratic party, the largest opposition party in Enschede. This position was never held by a woman and never held by a migrant before.

I am very grateful for my parents who led by example and offered me this chance. Surely they did not know all these opportunities when they took the step to flee our home country, but they did have a vision for a better future for us all.

We should similarly have a vision of a more equal society that values the contribution of all women, which is better for men and women alike. Doing so we follow in the footsteps of our courageous and heroic predecessors like Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Aletta Jacobs and Joke Smit, even if our own small steps are not giant leaps. Many small steps together will form the next leap forwards towards the necessary change.

Thank you,

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